Last of the American Boys
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Last of the American Boys

by smootherthanastorm

Summary

It's summer of 2003 and Dean Winchester's first solo hunt takes him to Casper, Wyoming. He drinks a lot, kills some ghost and falls in love a little.

Notes

This story has been inspired by starting a Supernatural rewatch from the beginning and is an attempt at exploration of young Dean's psyche. This story would not have been written without the support of the lovely Katie, whom I also thank for proofreading this work.

“Bobby Singer called.”

Dean looks up from his eggs and bacon and frowns slightly as John eases into his seat opposite. His father and old Singer aren’t on speaking terms ever since the Sam fiasco. Bobby has explicitly expressed his disapproval of Winchester upbringing methods, including cutting off disobedient offspring, and revoked their invitation to his house in Sioux Falls.

Dean is sure as hell this isn’t an apology call.

“There’s a case in Casper, Wyoming. Looks like a haunting.”

“Did you tell him we’re tied up in Idaho? We don’t even know what the damn thing is yet or how many bodies it’s left lying around.” There’s this stare again and Dean shifts uncomfortably as he reaches for his coffee and takes a sip. It’s been there ever since Sam left, measuring, cautious, as if John expected Dean to spring him up with even greater nonsense than his younger brother. It was a little disappointing, actually. He’s always been the good one and to think that his father would think so little of him made his insides flip.

“I told him you’d take the job. You’re old enough and it should be enough to handle for one.”

“A hunt? On my own?” Dean leans back in his booth. Just him and his baby, the road and a monster at the end. It doesn’t sound so bad at all. “But you think you can handle... whatever it is here?”

“Yes, Dean, I’m capable,” John huffs with badly hidden exasperation and Dean hides behind his cup again.

“Sure. No big deal then.”

Except it kind of is and Dean stuffs his mouth with cold eggs and bacon to keep himself from smiling.

“I hope you are, too,” John rumbles, voice measuring and daring, snapping Dean out of his though, planning the route in his head already, as if he is waiting for Dean to admit that he’s a goddamn weakling who cannot even go on a hunt on his own at 24.

“Yes, sir,” Dean confirms, as he straightens up, the hair on the back of

his neck standing.

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“Let’s go, baby.” Dean presses the pedal into the floor, tires screeching and engine roaring to life, the same thrum as blood in his veins. There’s 500 miles of road ahead of him but it could easily be a thousand; between the roar of Impala’s engine, Zeppelin II playing and the sound of the wind from rolled-down windows, Dean thinks this might be the closest to happiness he’ll ever be. He grins and takes a last bite of his burger before throwing the wrapper out the window. Mile by mile, trees and valleys of Idaho are started to by accompanied by mountains and there’s Yellowstone looming in the distance. For a stretch of 20 miles Dean fights the urge to take the next exit and drive north; and after, whenever he’d like to.

But he remembers his father’s face when Sammy left as well as his own desolation. He has an obligation to the job; to kill monsters, to get revenge for his mom. He misses the exit and speeds up, not looking behind.

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It’s late night when he arrives, putting his car into park as he pulls up in front of the Western Motel (“Welcome to Cowboy Paradise!”). There’s horse posts that designate parking spaces and horseshoes encircling the numbers on doors. Dean suspects there are authentic horses nearby, too, given the smell.

The room is all he could have expected from Cowboy Paradise, including three gratuitous Clint Eastwood movies and this is something Dean can get behind. By the time he’s arrived it’s too late to talk to witnesses in the morning and research can be done in the middle of the night and the bar just across the road is calling to him, promising an authentic cowboy experience and money duly earned by pool hustling.

Turns out, nobody wears cowboy gear in a bar in Wyoming except for a few losers.

Dean isn’t good at pool; he’s great, but he’s not showing off. He doesn’t want to attract attention he doesn’t need if he won all games in a row, so he loses some, but the last one – it’s late enough and people are too tipsy to fully appreciate his prowess and get angry. He

finishes the game, collects the money and watches other players dwindle away, considerably lighter in their wallets. Much to his chagrin, no girls were cheering on the game, just one guy in a cowboy hate who seemed intent on holding his stare every now and again for the past two hours.

“Nice game.”

Dean stashes the bills in his back pocket and turns. There he is, tall and in plaid, some really tight jeans and sneakers. Not much of a cowboy, Dean supposes but it doesn’t really matter. He flicks his tongue across his lips, twirling the cue in his hand and he leans back on the table.

“Nice hat.”

“Yeah, you know. I figured it works on the…” the other man drags his eyes around. Yeah, Dean knows. Chicks. Guys. Whatever floats your boat.

“Yeah, it does.” A beat, two. Dean bites down on his lip, fingers tightening around the cue. His heart hammers in his chest with anticipation, arousal and fear. It’s been a silly thing that happened when he was almost out of high school, two boys fooling around and the shame and disgust that burnt at him from the inside whenever he looked at his father. This was supposed to be the first and the last time, but it turned out Dean wasn’t very strong-willed when whiskey has already burnt its way down his throat and there was another body, taut and all sharp lines and hard and willing; when it was just ten minutes, just knees bruised from kneeling in a bathroom stall; and pleasure seeping down into his bones, intent on resting within, with his face mashed against a pillow and strong hands holding up his hips was more imminent and more intense than the fear of his father’s rage and the disappointment in his brother’s eyes if they knew.

Every time was the last time, of course. Each time a promise, resolution, broken every few months after the two years he spent hooking up with as many women as he could and celibacy from men. At least he wasn’t gay; he still enjoyed a nice rack and a hot, wet pussy just like any other guy. It was just a phase.

Even if one that lasted at least six years was pretty damn long for a phase.

Dean realises he’s been staring, tracing the other man’s feature with hungry eyes. It’s been a long time, Sam’s departure a catalyst for him

and John to stick even closer. He can't remember the last time he was alone if it wasn't in the bathroom.

John is 500 miles away, Sam even further and God knows where, but Dean knows he's okay. And they won't find out if Dean sucks a cock tonight.

"I'm Neal?" The cowboy offers, breaking somewhat uncomfortable silence. He has a nice, low drawl that goes down Dean's spine straight to his dick.

"Dean. Let me buy you a drink."

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"So you like cowboys, huh?"

"I've always liked cowboys, dude. Ever since I was a kid."

"More than Indiana Jones?"

"Are you askin' me if I like 'em more than *Indiana Jones* or Harrison Ford? That makes a difference, man."

Three shots down and Dean *really* likes Neal. He's not a cowboy, fair enough, but his grandfather used to be before he sold all his cattle and settled down in Casper. That makes the hat authentic. Neal also likes Zeppelin, even if AC/DC is a little bit closer to his heart. He has an almost complete collection of Joseph Heller's books and drives a '68 Dodge Charger. Neal's parents are working dull 9 to 5 jobs that have put Neal through college in Denver.

He also sits very close to Dean, talking low and almost into his each which is excusable before the general public given the roar in the joint at this hour. Soon someone will start slow-dancing to REO Speedwagon, Dean's sure of it. Their knees are brushing every now and again and Dean is a nurturing a half-hard on, trying very hard to stop it from developing into something more before they are out of here.

"What about your family?" Neal inquires, ordering two more shots. He's a little red in the face and Dean fights the urge to reach out and flat his palm against Neal's stubbly cheek.

Dean chuckles darkly, eyes darting to the other end of the counter, away from the other man. He drinks his shot quickly, wiping his

mouth with the back of his hand.

“It’s complicated.” He settles down the glass, fingers curled around it. “My mom died when I was little.”

“Sorry about that.” Neal’s eyes are soft and Dean knows he really is.

“And things between me, my dad and my brother... Yeah, complicated is a good word,” Dean mumbles as he gestures for another round, pursing his lips. He has been hoping his dad wouldn’t loom over tonight, which was supposed to be all about boys and fun. They clink their glasses, and grin still managing to creep on Dean’s face.

“Because you’re gay?,” Neal offers helpfully and Dean nearly chokes on his drink. He leans on the counter, arms crossed and gives Neal a withering look.

“Dude, I’m not. Okay?” This earns him eyebrows raised so high they disappear beneath Neal’s fringe and shut up, Dean doesn’t think it would be nice to hold on to it in an hour or so.

“Sure. Sorry I asked.” Neal gives him an apologetic smile. “Let’s just drink, right?”

“T’s okay. It’s fucked up.” He smiles at the bartender as he pours their drinks. “Right, Bart?”

“That’s not my name. And that’s your last drink, I think.”

“Actually, yeah. I have work in the morning.” He winks at Neal. “No rush though.”

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They walk out together. Dean is swimming a little, drunk on whiskey and newfound freedom. “I’m usually workin’ with my dad, ya know,” he drawls, slinging an arm around Neal’s arms, “but he let me go on my own this time. It’s nice.”

“What’s the work you’re doing?”

“Complicated.”

“Thought so.” Neal’s smileis warm and genuine and heat is pooling in Dean’s stomach and chest, a thrill he couldn’t entirely blame on the alcohol. They’ve known each other for about four hours and in all this time have kept their clothes on. This was a novelty to Dean when it

came to boys.

They walk towards Neal's car and Dean can't keep a wolf-whistle down when he sees her. Not as lovely as his Impala, sure, but it is still pretty awesome.

"So where are you staying? I'll drive you," Neal asks as he pulls out the keys from his pocket.

"There," Dean chuckles and points to the motel across the road. Neal winces, disgust flashing across his features. "I guess your work budget is pretty tight, innit?"

"It's still closer than your place and it has a bed," Dean mumbles into Neal's ear, voice hoarse as he presses him against the wall of the building. His hands slide down to the other man's hips, thumbs rubbing gentle circles. Dean tips the rim of Neal's hat as he leans forward to kiss the corner of Neal's mouth.

"Dude, I'm not that cheap a date," Neal whispers, shoulders stiffening.

"Well, I am."

There's a warm hand on Dean's cheek, and he closes his eyes, exhaling slowly. This isn't how it usually goes down.

"You shouldn't be." A kiss on his nose. "Come on, I'll walk you to your room."

The night is warm and balmy and it's really perfect for some car sex, Dean thinks bitterly as they walk across the street. But it still feels good and will even better if he manages to steal a proper goodnight kiss.

"So. You're working tomorrow, right?" Neal asks, swaying on his heels slightly, Dean leaning against the door of his room.

"Yeah."

"How long are you staying here?"

"I don't know yet. Might be a couple days, might be a week."

"Cool. Well if you want to grab a drink tomorrow as well, I'll be back there," Neal shrugs and points to the bar. Act casual, right?

"Yeah, I'd be surprised if I didn't end up there." Dean rolls his eyes

and breaks into a smile. He gets the feeling he might have a trouble falling asleep tonight as he pulls Neal in for a kiss, light pressure on his lips. “See ya.”

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Inside his room, Dean pours himself another drink as he sits in front of his laptop, nicked two weeks ago from a businessman’s car’s trunk as he reads the articles pertaining to the case.

Four days ago, a woman was found shot dead in her house, time of death estimated for midnight sharp. She and her husband kept no firearms; her husband left that night after a heated argument and walked to a nearby bar. He didn’t come home until the police were at the site already, called by the neighbours who had heard shots fired. The doors and windows were locked, and there was no sign of forced entry.

Dean sighs as he leans back in his chair. This could be either a really good killer, or an angry spirit. He reads further; turns out that there have been similar deaths in the house, and they all happened on August 10th, at random intervals.

Dean keeps scrolling.

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As it turns out, working solo requires much more legwork. From the police report Dean has gathered, the husband after having been cleared by the police, has gone away to his sister’s ranch out of town. Dean has driven there but the only thing he got out of it was the enjoyment of the drive; the man was stricken with grief and didn’t remember a thing.

Thus, it was the time for Colin Plant, journalist from Cheyenne, to pay a visit to Mr and Mrs Haverford across the street.

Dean shifts uncomfortably as he parks his car by the curb. Neatly pressed shirts and cardigans seemed to itch at the very essence of his being, especially in Wyoming in the middle of August. He slams the door a little harder than he expects and flinches, tapping the hood affectionately as he walks by the car, muttering an *I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean that.*

The abode of Mr and Mrs Haverford is as much the embodiment of apple-pie life and American dream as it could possibly be and just

walking the steps Dean feels like he doesn't belong. He attempts to be casual, sweat trickling down his neck not helping at all with his professional look. Pretending to be someone else always came easier when he was hunting with his dad; he only had to follow his lead, do as told and keep in line.

Keep in line. That he can do. Failing on a hunt so easy would earn him plenty of disdain from his father and maybe a bruise or two, so Dean straightens up and reaches for the doorbell, a fake smile plastered on his face.

Mrs Haverford answers the door, a small, slim woman in her fifties, still wrapped in her dressing gown. She raises his eyebrows at him. "Yes?"

"Good morning. My name is Colin Plant and I'm a journalist from Cheyenne Tribune. I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about—"

"The murder, yes." The woman sighs and sizes him up; a smile crept on her face. "First time, is it?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Well, come on in then. You can sit on the couch while I put something on."

Dean rests down in the living room gingerly, careful as if not to break anything. Everything is very middle-class, from the couch, sizeable tv and two cats on the windowsill. He strangles down a sneeze and pulls out his notepad and article clippings. He might as well look professional and busy. There is some clatter in the kitchen and the smell of coffee brewing. Mrs Haverford is a good host, after all.

"I was wondering when one of you guys would show up—what the hell?"

Dean jerks up at the familiar, low rumble and looks up to meet Neal's very, very confused face, as the other man enters the room with a coffee tray and blood seems to freeze in his veins.

Neal sets down the tray, brows furrowed and movements cautious. "I mean, I'm flattered. Really flattered. But... it's creepy. Seriously creepy."

“I’m not here for you, actually.” Dean makes what he thinks is an apologetic face and he’s fairly certain his heartbeat is obnoxiously loud. Pen slips from his fingers and disappears somewhere under the couch as Dean fidgets. Easy. This was supposed to be easy and he’s just blown his cover and he hasn’t even got laid last night. He waves his press badge to Neal. “See? I’m working.”

“Sure you are,” Neal chimes, sitting down and pouring two cups of coffee. “Milk?”

“No, thanks.” Dean accepts the brew and it’s his turn to frown. “I thought you’d kick me out by now.”

“I’m waiting for you to explain what the fuck you’re doing. And don’t say that it’s complicated.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Dean takes a sip, rakes his brain for a story. “I’m not a journalist.”

“No shit,” Neal murmurs into his cup, eyes rolling and Dean watches his Adam’s apple bob where the collar of his white shirt is open and inviting.

“That’s really good coffee, by the way.”

“I know.”

“Is this why you didn’t want to take me home last night? You still live with your parents?”

Neal scoots over, his thigh brushing against Dean’s knee and he jerks away, coffee spilling all over his notepad. And the carpet. He doesn’t think he has chances of getting out of here alive anymore.

“No. And no. I came over to buy them some groceries since dad’s not feeling very well.”

“That’s really nice of you.”

“Dean, will you tell me what the fuck is going on?”

Dean inhales deeply. This is it. “You’re not going to like it. I was going to ask your parents about the supposed murder because something’s really fishy about it, don’t you think?” Neal says nothing, so he takes his cue to continue. “Look, there’ve been no weapons in the house. The victim died from a gunshot wound to the heart in a room locked

from the inside, and it's not the first time. It's been happening for many years, people getting shot on August 10th just after midnight. Sometimes couples – the man always had a suicide wound then. They never found any bullets even though there were exit wounds and it was always the same caliber. Don't you think that's a little strange for a murder?"

Neal sits quietly, twisting his cup in its saucer. There's water running upstairs and he smiles feebly at Dean – "sorry, my mother always takes forever to get ready" – and takes a sip, then another, draining his drink. He sets the cup down with a little bit more force than necessary and runs a hand through his hair. Dean could run a hand through it, too.

"So you're—what you're saying it's almost like a ghost did it," Neal chuckles, but there's no mirth to it.

"I think an angry spirit is the most likely, yeah," Dean offers and beams a smile at Neal, who's staring at him wide-eyed. "Lovely eyes," he says with a wink.

Neal drags a hand down his face and he stands up and paces around the room, hands flying to his hips and fidgeting with his belt. "Why—why I'm not thinking you're completely insane? So what, ghosts are real? What next, vampires?" He looks, hopeful for a denial at Dean, who stares into his coffee. "Really?!"

Dean rolls his eyes and he draws his mouth to one side. "Actually—" he begins, softly. "One thing at a time, okay?"

Neal almost spins on his feet, grappling for understanding before he finally settles back next to Dean. "So, these things—you write about them?"

"Yeah. No. I kill them, actually," Dean says not without a dose of pride. It's not what he was *destined* to do, because Dean Winchester doesn't believe in goddamn destiny. But it's what he's been trained to do and he does it fucking well. And he loves it.

Not that he has a choice.

"Oh." The other man cocks an eyebrow, straightening up. "That's pretty cool."

"I know. Chicks dig it. You know, once they get past the *monsters are real* thing."

“Not just chicks.” This one earns Neal a particularly lewd smile, slow and predatory, Dean Winchester’s best, rolling his lower lip between his teeth, heart teetering on the edge. There’s silence for a beat or two as the distance between them diminishes as Neal leans in and Dean catches a whiff of his soap and cologne, noticing perspiration just under his collar.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr Plant—Oh, I see you’ve met my son already,” Mrs Haverford exclaims as she bustles into the room and Dean straightens up, scooting away from Neal, neck suddenly rigid and stiff. He risks a glance at Neal and admonishes himself for letting his concentration down. Pretending to be a good son to any parental figures he might encounter is a habit that dies hard.

“Yes, I have,” Dean says and he can’t hold back a smile and the memory from last night flooding his brain, scrape of stubble underneath his lips and sharp, jutting hips beneath his palms. His eyes flicks to Neal who has taken to staring out the window, one arm thrown behind the couch and behind Dean. He licks his lips and breathes in deeply. He’s done this hundreds of times but the lack of his dad’s self-assured presence seems to be draining his confidence away with each passing second.

“I got your part of the story from the police – you have heard gunshots across the street and called 911, is that right?” Mrs Haverford nodded avidly at that. “But I wonder, have there been any... weird things in the house? Maybe when you visited your neighbours, you have noticed odd smells, cold spots... This kind of thing,” Dean carries on, scribbling swirls in his notebook. Beside him, he senses Neal bristling up.

“No, I don’t think so. They were such a normal couple. It must have been a regular break-in and the burglar panicked, I suppose.” Mrs Haverford sighes. “At least that’s what the police say.”

“I have,” Neal pipes up, voice gloom, hand shielding his eyes, fingertips rubbing into his temples. “When I was returning the wood saw. I’d go one step further and it was suddenly very cold.” He shoots a glance at Dean who mouths *later* at him.

“Don’t be silly, sweetie, they had their AC broken,” Mrs Haverford croons, flashing an apologetic smile at Dean. The hunter smiles back, eyebrows raised.

Dean draws a little ghost in his notepad as he listens to Mrs Haverford

rambling on about her neighbours' outrageous sleeping habits.

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He leaves the house 30 minutes later, Neal trudging behind him. He corners Dean by his car and the stern look he gets in those brown eyes is making Dean's pulse elevate slightly.

"So you wanna get into my backseat that bad, huh?" he croons, throwing his bag and notepad through the open window. "Knock yourself out."

"We wouldn't even—yeah okay, maybe we *would* fit there. So what do you do with ghosts?"

"I gank 'em. Find the remains, then salt and burn, baby. It's that simple." Dean drags a hand down his face, already feeling the weariness of going through county records before he's even started. "I have to find out who's the son of a bitch." He closes his eyes and tips his head back. Hunting alone is really tedious – everything is a solitary pursuit, and he has to take care of research as well as cleaning the guns and he didn't even get his four hours last night because somehow his mind kept coming back to this stupid not-quite-cowboy, replaying the moments at the bar over and over again, painting scenarios that derailed from there and palming his straining cock in half-slumber, everything coated in the amber haze of whiskey.

"You're probably going to see when it all started, right?" Neal asks.

"Yeah. Goin' through county records."

"They're not going to let you browse them, you know," Neal rolls his eyes as if he doesn't know he's talking to a professional. Dean opens the driver's door and crawls into the seat, rummaging through the glove department.

"I'm not gonna be the one that does that"—he throws a busted tape in the backseat – "but special agent Hetfield," Dean says, emerging with a fake FBI badge and flashing it in Neal's face.

"Rock star names as aliases, really?" He holds down the badge to study it. "It actually looks very authentic."

"It totally isn't, but fools everyone." Dean grins. "I gotta get down to the morgue first, see what the coroner has to say about the body."

“That’s gross. Do you do that a lot?”

“Yeah. You can get used to it. Better than digging up graves,” Dean says with a shrug, unfazed by the expression of pure disgust on Neal’s face. “Don’t worry, I wash my hands.”

“That’s a crime, you know. Grave desecration,” Neal sighs and shakes his head.

“It’s good exercise.” Dean flexes as he walks over to the trunk and pulls over his cardigan, replacing it with a cheap suit jacket and a tie, slightly frayed on the edges. He takes his time, drawing out his movements for Neal’s benefit. He’s really itching to get laid tonight; this trip has been way too stressful and with his dad keeping him busy, he hasn’t had a chance to hook up properly in the last two weeks. Not that he was that much in the mood, when his little brother leaving them – *him* – for good kept hanging over the two of them and didn’t seem to let up.

Except for Casper, Wyoming. Clear skies here. Clearer.

“I’d help, you know,” Neal offers. “Not with the grave digging! With the records. But I have to get to work. Which is pretty much the same you’ll be doing, actually. Only you’ll be doing ghost-accounting,” Neal breathes out, chuckling lightly.

“Dude, my job is way cooler than you make it sound,” Dean says, doing his best to sound offended, fake indignation breaking into a smile.

“It’s the cool accounting.”

“There’s no such thing as cool accounting. Just some... not lame accountants,” Dean concedes, noticing how Neal seems to be locking his gaze and no, his heart most definitely hasn’t made a leap off a cliff and he can’t break away, blood ringing in his ears in the quiet street. “I think your mom’s watching.” Dean is not sure – she might as well be – but he needs an excuse to break the moment and to get away before he scrambles with Neal into his car and they abandon this case completely in favour of some bareback riding. Save the horse, ride the cowboy. Dean can’t believe he’s waited so long since crossing the state border to make that joke.

Neal groans and rolls his eyes. “God, she’s been pestering me about getting ‘back out there’ for ages. It’ll give her something to think about.” He kisses Dean quickly, so brief he almost fails to notice the

spark it sends through his body. “I think you have a morgue to get to.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you,” Dean mutters as he gets into the car and once he turns the ignition, the sweet purr of the Impala bringing him back to confidence. He drives away, but his eyes are fixed on the tall figure waving at him in the rearview mirror.

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“What a cute lil’ fed you are.” The mortician is a middle-aged man with a drawl that makes him difficult understand and slow movements that are utterly mismatched with his curious eyes, darting back and forth, right now squinting as he studies Dean’s badge. “I guess you young’uns always get the short straw. Har har.” He returns his badge to Dean and pats him on the shoulder, his grip surprisingly strong. “Been ‘ere. Got up to my elbows in guts as a rookie.”

Dean exhales the air he’s been holding in for the last minute. With his age it’s difficult to pass as a special agent. His father had complained it, as if it was Dean’s fault he had a young, freckled face and lush lips. He’s been complimented about how amazing they look around a cock; and for that, he *does* feel guilty.

The mortician is waving at him from the table where the body of the victim lies and Dean walks over, grabbing two rubber gloves and putting them on. The other man lifts the sheet and points to a hole in the woman’s chest. “Single gunshot wound. Very clean shot.”

“Yeah. You think he was a pro?”

“Everyone’s a pro round ‘ere, boy.” The mortician frowns at him as if personally offended.

“Nothing weird about the body?”

“People usually die when a bullet goes through their heart.”

Dean nods, holding back an eyeroll. That’s usually how it goes. Unless they’re freakin’ zombies. He hates zombies.

“There is one thing though,” the other man says as he pinches his chin. “The burn marks on the body—typical for older guns. Revolvers.”

“How old are we talkin’?” Dean perks up from where he’s studying the tag hanging from the victim’s toe. Old is good. Old means secrets and

remains buried six feet under, waiting to be torched.

“Not later than the fifties.”

“Thanks.” Dean holds back a groan. He hates going through county records, breathing in the musty smell of old paper and mold. And fungus, probably. He’s pretty sure he’s going to end up with mushrooms growing inside his lungs one day and that is not the way he wants to go. That was always Sammy’s job and the kid was always good at it. So good he’ll be doing this for a living.

“That’ll be all, I think,” Dean says lightly as he heads for the exit.

“Be my guest. Har har.”

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The ginger lady behind a counter in city hall seems impervious to Dean’s half-hearted attempts at flirting; she’s boring holes in his skull with her eyes. She glances at his badge before taking off, walking in quick small steps towards the stairs, waving her hand at Dean to follow her. He catches up with her and tries again.

“I bet you’re not always so quiet,” he ventures with a wolfish grin and nearly falls off the steps as she turns, gaze smoldering. It comes automatic to him, without thinking really, to gain at least a smile from at least slightly attractive girl, perhaps especially now and in this town.

“I don’t speak with jerks, as a rule.”

She delivers him to an elderly lady sitting in an office adjacent to the file room, tosses some papers on her desk and storms out.

The lady raises an eyebrow at him and clicks her mouth disapprovingly as she reads the file she’s been handed.

“Death certificates, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, everyone has to start somewhere,” her voice softens as she eyes Dean carefully. “Try not to inhale too deeply. We’re out of face masks.”

“Do they help?” Dean asks.

“Not really.” She adjusts her glasses. “Second aisle on the left, oldest at the end.”

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Dean hasn’t even taken his walkman with him, the one that he hasn’t started developing into an EMF meter to use some Metallica to soothe him. He’s been going through moldy, dusty death certificates for over an hour now and he has only reached August 10th, 1944, having started from the sixties.

He has also sneezed seven times in total already and he is sure his voice has dropped at least two octaves. He wishes Sammy was here, helping him go through the stupid files, making stupid jokes and generally making the time flow a little faster. Making hunting ghosts actually more fun.

Dean closes the drawer with more force than necessary, the force of the slam reverberating through the entire cabinet. He punches it for good measure, hissing when the force of impact breaks the skin on his knuckles.

“Fuck. Fuck, this hurts,” he mutters to himself, deciding in the end to wipe the blood on the back of his shirt, hidden underneath his suit jacket anyway.

He doesn’t know if he’s more angry because his little brother has abandoned them for good, refusing even to pick up his calls, or jealous that he had the guts to do it. Forsaking the obligation he has, which is despicable, of course. He knows he’d never be brave enough, or spineless enough, to be so ungrateful as that to their dad, who’s only ever done his best.

A treacherous voice offers*, Like the time he was so drunk from the night before that you had to carry him out to the car without paying the motel bill, and drive the fucking car at just* fifteen.

Dean breathes in deeply (“*fuck”* again, now he’s certainly going to die of fungal infection*)* and tries to compose himself, something brimming in him. He could be in Yellowstone right now. He could be in college right now if he hadn’t dropped out, obligation to do so for the sake of the family unvoiced but tangible. He could stop being ashamed and frightened of what he does sometimes in the sweaty darkness and thinks about a lot more. He stop living up to whatever his dad thinks is right. His mom could be alive and hold him and tell him everything is okay and that she loves him no matter what and this is all he could

ever need to be happy.

Dean almost convinces himself his nose is running because of all the molecules of crumpled paper and dust floating in the air, the same thing that has his eyes stinging. He runs a hand through his hair and continues rummaging through the documents, until an hour later he ascertains that the first deaths at the house occurred in 1928. There was a police note attached, saying the couple has had the house built for themselves two years prior.

“Gotcha,” he says to himself as he jots down the name of the perpetrator, a man who shot his wife and then killed himself. The woman was cremated; the man was buried in the local graveyard.

The sun is already setting as Dean emerges, victorious. He gets in the Impala and heads to the motel, changing out of his suit into something more comfortable. He catches himself going through his duffle bag and picking out a t-shirt and a plaid shirt to wear; but hey, you have to stay classy for the ghosts, too, right? The fact that tall, lanky brown-haired guys might be waiting for him in the meanwhile is not a factor to Dean Winchester.

Dean dumps his usual grave-digging gear into the trunk and heads to the bar across from his motel. He definitely needs a shot of whiskey to clear his airwaves and grave-digging during daylight seems just *wrong*. Maybe he also needs something else.

That something was the counter, shelves of whiskey behind it and Neal on a bar stool.

“Hi.” Dean grins at the other man as he orders a shot, Neal nursing a beer of his own.

“Evenin’. I thought you’d gone on that little digging trip of yours already.”

“Nah,” Dean says as he takes his drink and tips the glass to his lips immediately, savouring the smoky burn in his throat. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes trained on Neal. No hat tonight. “Too early.”

“I thought ghosts struck at midnight,” Neal chuckles into his beer. He seems tense and uncomfortable at the edges. “I’ve been thinking about the monster thing all day at work. It’s kind of Earth-shattering.”

“I guess,” Dean whispers, voice still a little raspy. “You can try not to

think about it."

"Does it do you much good?"

"No. But at least my nightmares are realistic." Dean's sitting on a stool, turned away from the counter and towards the other man. He'd walked in yesterday hoping for a quick fuck in the bathroom maybe, in the back of his car or even on a proper bed; yet here he is, spilling his pathetic guts in front of a guy who doesn't seem to mind, doesn't seem to notice how full of crap he is; instead, he smiles softly with some weird compassion and Dean blushes at the absurdity of the whole situation. They might as well be holding hands.

Dean's never held hands with anyone.

This should feel ridiculous, the two of them hanging in the bar, talking, shoulders and knees brushing. Dean doesn't drink anymore; he's still on the job, after all. It feels dumb and he grits his teeth and tries to stop pretending that he minds how easy this feels.

"What happened to your hand?" Neal asks at some point, pointing to the scabs on Dean's knuckles.

"I punched a steel cabinet." He refuses to meet Neal's eyes, brown and concerned, but he says it anyway. "I'm angry about Sam leaving for college." I'm thinking about the second worst night of my life, is what he doesn't say, his family falling apart once again. About locking his jaw, holding back tears. About his dad's desolation, manifesting in empty bottles and bruises on Dean's back.

"Don't," snaps at Neal, watching him opening his mouth to say something like *can't blame him* or *kid made the right choice.* "Just don't."

"I won't," Neal says softly but Dean doesn't miss an eyeroll. He glances at his watch.

"Well, it's ghosty time."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Neal extends an obvious courtesy but Dean laughs him off.

"No, man, thanks. I'll manage."

"Okay. In that case," Neal says as he grabs a napkin and pulls a pen from the pocket of his jeans, "I'll probably be out of here soon. But

you can come over. If you want to." He slides the napkin with his address towards Dean, wiping a few drops of alcohol on its way.

"Yeah, okay." Dean fights to ignore the slight tremor in his hands and voice. It's been a long time since he's been this upset about getting laid. Neal's face falls and Dean realises how *un*enthusiastic he has managed to come across.

Before his brain has the chance to kick in and hold him back, he takes Neal's chin in his hands and presses a hurried kiss somewhere right to his mouth, sloppy and wet and smelling like booze before practically running out of the joint to the safety of the Impala. He turned the ignition, put her in drive and gunned it for the graveyard.

--

Solitary grave-digging is really exhausting, as it turns out. By the time he's done, Dean has shed his shirt and slipped in the mud once. The shovel resounds on a coffin, at last; he rips down the moulded wood to reveal a neat skeleton.

"Hiya," Dean says as he holds up a can of salt and a can of gasoline in each hand, luxuriously spilling the goods on the bones. He puts them aside and lights a match, drops it and watches the flames consume the remains. This was one of the easiest hunts in his career but it does feel rather anticlimactic for his first solo job.

He was expecting the actual ghost to show up maybe and threaten to shoot him as well. He did spent some time last night preparing salt rounds and cleaning his shotgun and now this all would go to waste. Dean knows he should call his father and tell him he hasn't let him down, pack up and get out of town to go back to John in less than an hour.

He dials the number.

"Hey, dad? Yeah, I'm good. Listen, it's gonna take a little while longer." A pause, as he listens to the low voice at the other end. "Yeah, I need to do some more research. I'm meeting with a historian tomorrow." He looks around the hole in the ground he's in, wincing at various bugs squiggling their way in through the moist ground. "Until the end of the week, probably. Yeah. Yes sir. Over."

--

The 5-mile drive to Neal's house was one of the longest ones.

He passes through streets wrapped in silence and darkness, hand reaching out to turn on the radio; but his hand falters before the button. It's just him and Impala's purr, a sweet promise hanging on his mind and a bitter realisation that it's not a heat of the moment kind of thing, and he's not even slightly drunk; his hands are sweaty as he grips the steering wheel.

The light is on in what he thinks is Neal's apartment as he parks on the street before a small apartment building and a dog starts barking, stirred from its sleep by the roar of the engine and the creak of the door. He walks slowly as if fighting for every step; every step that he doesn't want to think is admitting to being someone he's not supposed to be.

Dean knocks on the door, twice before it opens, revealing a smiling Neal a very appealing short-sleeved plaid shirt. There's nothing that speaks to a Winchester like plaid, the proper dress of a true man. The other man grabs him by his lapels with one hand and pulls him inside. He closes the door and presses Dean against it, mouth hovering inches from his.

"Evenin'," he murmurs as he shifts closer, their noses touching and Dean's breath hitches. "So the ghost is gone."

Dean's hands slide down Neal's body to his hips and stay there, pulling him even closer, their bodies aligned perfectly together. "Yeah." The heat radiating from the other man is almost unbearable, and Dean feels the swell in Neal's pants press against his crotch, rippling pleasure through his own cock. He takes a shallow breath and tips his head, teeth catching on Neal's bottom lip as he grinds his hips forward; it's like jumping into cold water.

There are hands everywhere, meticulously popping away at his buttons and one reaching down to cradle his already straining cock, aching for attention. Dean's hand is fisted in Neal's hair, holding him in place as he kisses him, smears his mouth over Neal's lips and neck and ears before coming back to the front. It's sloppy and warm and *right* and Dean can't stop kissing him, latching on to Neal's lips like to salvation. He can't tell their heartbeats apart, hammering away in their chests as blood flows south and Dean is moaning into the kiss, arching his hips up for a little more friction, a tighter tug of this hand on his length. He feels the blood pulse underneath Neal's fingers and the slick slide of precome staining his underpants, the head of his cock already sensitive as it rubs against the fabric. Dean's other hand slides down Neal's pants to return the favour but he pauses after

unbuttoning his jeans, breaking away from the kiss, gasping for air. He looks up at Neal, eyes hooded with lust – son of a gun is two inches taller than him – and flips them over, pressing the other man against the hard wood instead.

"I'm gonna make it so good for you, yeah?" he whispers into Neal's ear, breath ghosting over his neck, kissing down the goosebumps that appear as he slides down, sinking slowly to his knees. His heart catches somewhere in his throat when he continues to undo Neal's pants, air coming thick through his nose. He presses his lips to the soft skin just under the bellybutton, dark curly hair tickling his chin and works his way down as he tugs down the underpants and feels the heat of Neal's length, dark and dripping. He holds down a moan but it seems to reverberate in his chest anyway as his lips circle the head and he slips forward, sheathing the thick cock in his mouth. Neal's knees buckle as Dean licks the underside, threatening to slip to the floor, but Dean's hands on his hips keep him steady. Neal's hand comes to cradle his cheek as he works on the hardness, heavy and warm on his tongue. Dean steadies himself and takes Neal deep in, then; and the mixture of the bitter and sweet taste in his mouth and Neal's low rumbling litany of *oh god fuck oh fuck* sends a shiver down his spine. He works laboriously on Neal's cock, the slow slide in and out as his cheeks hollow out threatening to send him over the edge, his own dick so hard it almost hurts and Dean fists one hand in the fabric of his denim on his thigh to keep himself from touching it, his erection begging for friction. He hears a hushed, rasped whisper – "*Dean, stop, I'm about to—*" but he doesn't, he pick up his pace instead and moans around the shaft, then moves to tongue the slit gently, lapping up the pooling precome, before swallowing Neal down whole, pressing down his throat and then there's a burst of white heat down as Neal's breathes heaves and his nails scrape the door; Dean opens his eyes to look at him, lips parted and head thrown back as he swallows. Neal's knees give out then and he slumps to the floor, Dean between his legs. He licks the come off his lips and he holds Neal's gaze and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, releasing his fisted hand. It's good; it's what he can get lost in.

"That was... positively the best fucking blowjob I've ever had," Neal almost whimpers and Dean feels a rush of pleasure and he can't hold back anymore; he fits his hand in his pants and with two, three, four sharp tugs he's coming, soiling his clothes, doubling over into Neal's shoulder, pleasure wringing him boneless. He brings his palm, sticky with come to his mouth but Neal is quicker, grabbing his wrist and pulling his hand close; he licks him clean slowly, digit by digit, eyes half-lidded as he keeps them trained on Dean, who tries his best to

level his breathing.

Dean leans to slump against Neal, legs tangling as he breathes in the musky smell on his neck, sweat and sex and soap. He takes Neal's chin in his hand and pulls him closer, turning his head so it's easier to kiss the last flecks of pleasure out of him, unhurried and blissful. For a minute, the weight of the world lifts off his shoulder; in this warm space under the door of limbs and ruffled brown hair sticking to temples, plastered with sweat there is no monsters, no demanding dads and estranged brothers.

"I'm good, ya know? For the first time since..." Dean trails off. Since he was a kid. Since he was last in love, though it's been a particularly long time. Neal wraps his arms around him, keeping him close. He nips at Neal's lower lip and tries to bury the resurfacing burn of shame and fear of his dad catching up with him and seeing him like *this.* For a second he wishes for it; for a fallout, for an argument so hideous he would have no choice to run away and not look back once. Hell, he could start hunting on his own. He could see how Sammy's doing. He could try *staying* somewhere, say, a town in Wyoming, for a little longer.

"I hope I helped."

"Yeah."

Neal sighs deeply as he starts kissing Dean's cheek and it's a scrape of stubble against stubble, a light but not entirely unpleasant burn. "I wish I could help you some more. Fix you a little."

Dean laughs, hollow. "There's no fixin' *me*." Neal's kisses descend to his jaw and Dean closes his eyes as a tremor runs through his body.

"I like you," Neal says, point-blank and Dean feels as if air was emptied from his lungs; he locks his jaw and grinds his teeth. This thing is getting under his skin and what bothers him the most is that he doesn't mind this much. He wants to deflect with a *Who doesn't? I'm adorable* or a sneer, but his voice won't make it past his throat. He settles for nothing but a hand on the nape of Neal's neck and bringing their foreheads together.

They end up crawling into Neal's bed, mattress squeaking under their bed. After the initial rush by the door, their undress is unhurried and almost reverent, slipping quietly out of clothes with lips locked. Dean can feel them bruised already and he smiles as he pushes Neal's shirt off his shoulders. He can sense blood rushing back to his cock as he

slides his hands down Neal's abdomen. They wriggle out of their jeans and underwear, socks forgotten in favour of Neal crawling on top of Dean. He brings their half-hard lengths together, strong hand coaxing them quickly into hardness and Dean hisses, toes curling. It's fast and sloppy and it feels so much better when it's not your own hand gripped around your straining, leaking dick, rubbing it against another. Dean's hands dig into Neal's ass, nails scraping lightly when the friction threatens to overcome him. He pulls Neal down for a deeper kiss, anew desperate with need and elation and he flips them over. Dean's hand slides over Neal's, slowly pumping their cocks together and they tangle for a while, sweat running down in rivers on Dean's neck. Neal reaches over to the nightstand drawer and fumbles for lube and a condom, handing them to Dean.

"This is gonna be even better," Dean says with a wolfish grin as he sidles up behind Neal, coating his fingers generously. He presses kisses to Neal's shoulder as he finds the crevice of his ass and slicks his fingers over the entrance before pushing in, slowly, one digit penetrating the tight rim of muscle. Neal's breath hitches slightly as he tenses up before relaxing, one hand gripping the sheets, fingers flexing and unflexing as Dean adjusts his angle and adds a finger, then another. "Feelin' good, baby?" he whispers as he crooks his fingers, pushing them further and Neal whimpers in response, cock twitching and leaking precome on his thigh, sheets bundling up underneath his hand.

"Dean, come on," Neal drawls, face hidden in the crook of his elbow. "Fuck me, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Dean murmurs into his ear and he withdraws his fingers with a deliciously obscene sound, so abandoned in watching Neal melt behind him that only now he realizes the fierce pull of his erection, rubbing against the small of Neal's back. He wipes his fingers on the sheets before grabbing the condom and rolling it quickly down his length, then smearing more lube on the thin rubber.

Dean can't hold back a groan as he pushes into the tight heat, inviting muscle perfectly sheathing his cock and he has to bite down on his lower lip to keep himself from whimpering at the pleasure. Neal's breath comes in short puffs but he growls "Don't stop" at Dean and pushes back and Dean slides all the way in, hand gripping Neal's hip, bruising. He starts with painfully slow thrusts, lifting Neal's leg up for better access. It's not nearly enough though, and it shocks him when Neal shifts away from him, panic threatening to sink in before he gets on all fours and Dean pushes back in, a soft moan, pitched higher than

Dean would like to admit, escapes his throat. He buries his length all the way, balls-deep and thrusts deeper and deeper, his left hand on Neal's right hip and another a soothing touch down his spine. They move in rhythm, Neal pushing back to meet Dean's cock, throbbing and aching inside of him that goes erratic soon, sweat pooling in the small of Neal's back, Dean's balls smacking against his perineum as he drives it home, moans and soft cries echoing in the small flat. Dean's thighs are trembling as he leans forward and wraps his hand around Neal's cock, heavy and dripping and Neal comes in that instant, surging forward, face mashing into the pillow, spasms wringing his body. Dean follows soon after with one last deep thrust, too breathless to let out a cry.

They tangled together again, Dean dropping out of consciousness almost immediately as he disposed of the condom.

--

Dean wakes up with sheets bunched down in his legs and a warm body pressing from behind. A glance at his watch tells him it's almost 4 am, sun threatening to start rising any time soon. He blinks awake, one hand rubbing at his eyes. He enjoyed this, the lingering touches even after some mind-blowing sex, as a rule; but saying goodbye wasn't really his style. He sits on the edge of the bed, naked save for a sock on his left foot, forearms resting on his thighs, head drooping. The room smells of sex and comfort and Dean doesn't want to leave just yet, even though he should leave this all behind before it gets messy and before strings latch onto him.

An attempt to slip out of bed unnoticed and reach for his jeans is foiled when Neal stirs, mumbles something incoherent before opening his eyes. He casts a look at Dean and furrows his brows, lips thinning. "Go back to sleep, will you?" His hand reaches out and covers Dean's, an anchor keeping him fixed. "We can at least eat breakfast like civilised people and then you can be on your way." There's a bitter edge to his voice that seems to lash at Dean and he covers his face with his hands.

"No," he says; or maybe he doesn't even say it out loud. "I mean, I'll stay. If that's cool." Dean turns to Neal and crawls back under the sheets, lifted in an invitation. Neal presses a kiss to his temple as his hands cradle Dean's cheeks. He doesn't have to go yet.

--

Sipping a cup of coffee in a bed still warm from morning, sleepy sex while reruns of Buffy are buzzing on tv in the background is one of Dean's favourite way to spend a morning so far.

The coffee is a particular highlight, which he communicates to Neal while trying on his cowboy that. This results in said hat being pulled over his face.

"That means more pancakes for me, cause you're out of here now."

They eat in the small but sunlit kitchen, clothing sparse save for boxers and old, washed-down t-shirts; feet brushing following purely accidental trajectories. NPR is on and Dean rolls his eyes in mock disgust before reaching out to change the station as he chews on a huge chunk of pancake. Neal slaps it away and kicks him under the table. "My house, my radio."

"I thought you were a fun guy, but your accountant is showing," Dean mumbles out, mouth still full. The radio chimes 9:15 am and Dean frowns. "Speaking of which, you're not doing numbers today? Just me?"

"I called in very sick this morning. They'll have to do without me until Thursday," Neal admits, his pancakes suddenly capturing all of his attention. "I mean, I haven't had a time off in a pretty long time. And I bet you've never been to a rodeo."

"Is that a—" Dean makes a vague, slightly obscene gesture with his fork. "Oh, you mean an actual rodeo. Nope."

"Would you like to?"

"Hell yeah. As long as I get to wear the hat." Dean flashes a smile at Neal as he tries to ignore the rising panic at the realisation that someone just took two days off work to spend them with Dean, of all people. Are they short-term boyfriends now? Dean doesn't do boyfriends.

Not in that way, at least. Some people could have been someone's boyfriends.

"Done. But only if you wear it in bed tonight."

--

Dean's phone doesn't ring until Wednesday evening. They're at the bar

again, playing pool. Dean needs some gas money for his trip back and it puts him back in a familiar environment. The last two days have been truly otherworldly to Dean, filled with carefree fishing, rodeos, walking through the woods, getting lost in said woods and actual home-made meals. He needs a grasp on reality back, though, even if it comes in shape of a cue poised to strike. There's nothing like reality like you dad telling you to get your ass back to Idaho as soon as you can, you hear me? Yes sir.

Dean closes in on an easy win and leaves the table, Neal in tow.

"I have to go tomorrow. My dad needs me back on the job," he says, stuffing the money into his pocket. He's been here too long. He's lucky his dad is still alive.

"You sure you don't wanna go tonight?"

Dean looks at Neal for a beat, two. He can still pride himself on more freckles but Neal is catching up quick once he's out of his office environment. "No." He swallows with difficulty. "In fact, I think I'll go to Yellowstone on my way back. I've never been." His dad is fine. He's tying up some loose ends with the job now and Dean has so much on his rap anyway he might as well live another dream. Going on a trip to a national park would be the least of his worries if dad were to find out about any of Dean's follies in Casper, Wyoming.

"I wish I would go with you. But I really can't."

"I know."

"I can drive you out tomorrow, though. If we leave early."

Dean grins. "Yeah, we can do that."

--

Dean parks the impala in front of the motel the following morning and winces slightly as he steps out. Last night he's shown Neal that Kansas boys do pretty well at Rodeo, too. He tilts his head down and smiles as he walks with a barely noticeable limp to his motel room to collect his things. Neal pulls up 15 minutes later and they head for US-20 together.

They pull over in a bay area 40 miles out of Casper, sun beating down relentlessly as Dean walks over to Neal's Dodge. The other man is leaning on the hood, a small box in his hands.

“What’s that?” Dean nods to the object.

“A disposable camera. Come ‘ere.” Neal pulls him to sit on the hood next to him and takes the camera out of the box. “Smile.” Shutter clicks once, twice. “There you go,” he says as he hands the camera to Dean. “I’m sorry I can’t go with you. “

“That’s a lousy replacement.”

Neal shrugs, smiling. “The best I could get on short notice.”

“Thanks, man.” Dean turns the thing in his hands before putting it down next to his thigh. He turns to Neal and stands between his legs, groin to groin and bucks his hips forward. He takes Neal’s face in his hands and kisses him, hiding in the shade of his hat, back on Neal’s head today. There are arms snaking around his waist and shoulders; he drags his lips across Neal’s mouth and cheek and jaw, unshaved for almost three days now. Each press of mouth to mouth gets more needy, more like holding on to something that was barely even there in the first place.

“I gotta go,” Dean says but doesn’t break away; closes his eyes and hovers an inch away for a minute. It gets too hot, eventually. They peel off each other.

“Thanks for everything, man.” Dean finds it harder than it should be. “It was awesome.”

“Yeah.” Neal smiles feebly at him. “Thanks for the rodeo.”

They shake hands and Neal gets into his car and drives away. Dean stays at the bend of the road for a little while longer, resting against the side of the Impala. “It’s just you and me again, baby.”

Dean takes the right exit this time. Soon the shadow of Yellowstone is upon him.

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